

# Hindutva and Zionism: A Story of Kinship

*And their differences aside, the pursuit of consolidating dominion to create unified states with a single culture and identity, predicated on erasing the “other” is what ultimately defined their kinship.*



by Azad Essa

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The New Alliance Between  
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“The Sangh used the Emergency to strengthen its overseas networks by engaging its members in new forms of activism to oppose the Indian government,” Edward Anderson and Patrick Clibbens write. It transformed the way the Indian government and political organizations interacted with the diaspora, too. The developments were among the first signs of the critical role the Indian diaspora would play in the making of a new India, impacting flows of capital, human resources and ideas. “Values that might have been important in India in the 1940s were no longer important in the 1980s. In fact, contrary values became more important,” Jangid says, adding, “In 1992, it was a different India.”

The change in “values” played out on the streets, where rallies like the “Ram Rath Yatra,” designed to instill fear into Muslims became the new Hindu motif across several states. It took place on television, as weekly serials showcasing epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, stirred hundreds of millions of hearts into fervent believers. It took place in cinema halls where Bollywood increasingly transported the Indian nation into Hindu diaspora homes, where patriots danced around trees in the Black Forest or under the bright lights of Times Square, but longed for the spiritual and cultural meaning of home. It took place in the Indian parliament, where some of the same actors who played gods on screen became elected officials on Hindu nationalist tickets.

In 1984, the BJP secured two seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house. The Congress party secured 426. In 1989, the BJP adopted Hindutva as its political program, calling for the scrapping of Article 370 in the constitution that granted Kashmir special rights; it achieved 88 seats. In 1991, it was 120. In 1996, it was 161. And by 1998, it had grown to 178, enough to form a coalition government. Its rise was prodigious; its impact on the social and cultural life of India, unmistakable. The RSS, having been formed in 1925, “were in government by 1977 and were leading in many areas of public life by the stroke of the new century.”

toward emulating the identity politics of the right wing.

Indira also grew more enamored by her new secret liaison with the Israelis, to devastating effect. In June 1984, Indira sent a group of commandos to crush a Sikh rebellion in Amritsar. The ragtag group of Sikh fighters, made up of army and police officers, were holed up in the Golden Temple Complex, among the most sacred sites in Sikhism. The commandos, known as Special Group or SG commandos, had received training from an elite branch of Mossad commanders in 1983 under an agreement with RAW. The Israeli commandos were famously known for the raid in Uganda's Entebbe Airport in Uganda in 1977, following the hijacking of an Air France aircraft by Palestinian militants. Indira's Operation Blue Star, as it was known, ended in a bloodbath. "The commandos were in black fatigues and wore night-vision glasses, M-1 steel helmets, bulletproof jackets, and carried sophisticated guns including AK-47 assault rifles. The commandos were capable of jogging at a speed of 40 km per hour," Prabash K. Dutta wrote.

Five months later, Indira's aggrieved Sikh bodyguards assassinated her. Congress supporters routed parts of the country in a three-day pogrom—primarily in the nation's capital—in which close to 3,000 Sikhs were killed. Witnesses recalled Sikhs being necklaced and bludgeoned on the streets of the capital. Indira's son Rajiv succeeded his mother as PM. The same SG unit was activated once more, now to protect Rajiv. Reacting to the carnage around him, Rajiv told a rally: "Once a mighty tree falls, it is only natural that the earth around it shakes." Rajiv was elected in December 1984 in a landslide.

The Emergency Years also marked a turning point in the relationship between Hindu nationalists in India and the Indian diaspora, especially those with Hindu nationalist leanings. Indians in the diaspora had been mobilized to help "restore democracy" in India. They had lobbied the American and British governments. They had taken out full page ads in the biggest and most read newspapers in the world. And they had sent resources back to India to help those purportedly standing up to PM Indira Gandhi.

## Hindutva and Zionism: A Story of Kinship

O Hindus! look upon Hindusthan as the land of your forefathers and as the land of your prophets, and cherish the priceless heritage of their culture and their blood, so long nothing can stand in the way of your desire to expand. The only geographical limits of Hindutva are the limits of our earth!

—*V.D. Savarkar*

Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindusthan to learn and profit by.

—*M.S. Golwalkar*

We recognize ourselves as a nation by our faith.

—*Theodor Herzl*

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) was little more than a low-level agitator against British rule when he was sentenced to jail in 1911. He was charged for supplying the gun used in the assassination of a British district magistrate in 1909 and sentenced to two 50-year sentences on the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. Savarkar's time in jail, however, did not augment a fervent anti-British sentiment. Within months, Savarkar asked for clemency, agreeing "to serve the government in any capacity," shifting his attention to what he saw as a far greater threat facing the Indian subcontinent: Muslims.

It was, however, from 1921, following his move to a jail in the port city of Ratnagiri in Maharashtra that he began drawing a blueprint for an independent India. Over the next two years, Savarkar began articulating a program he called Hindutva, or "Hinduness," a political philosophy that asserted Hinduism as the rightful identity of any future Indian state. Hindutva, Savarkar argued, would be the framework under which the country would be governed. It is only through the adoption of Hindutva that India could "return" to its glorious past. In other words,



Hindus would finally be able to reassert their pristine cultural and racial superiority and Muslims would be put in their place.

Fundamental to this program, Savarkar argued in his booklet “Essentials of Hindutva,” published in 1923, was the distinguishing of Hinduism from Hindutva. Being Hindu meant surrendering to the Sanskrit language and culture as heritage; demonstrating love and obedience to the motherland; and recognizing historical Hindu law and racial purity. Hinduism was also defined in contrast to that which might be considered foreign. And for Savarkar, this meant Muslims. For Hindu nationalists like Savarkar, Muslim “invasions” from Central Asia or the Arab world underscored that they were “foreign” to India. This sentiment belies the fluidity of state formation in pre-colonial India and flattens the diverse ethnic and regional political units along religious lines, a binary that has been challenged by recent South Asian historiography. To equate Muslims with British colonial rulers, then, is ahistorical. By Savarkar’s estimate, Hindutva, as a loose comparison, was a way of being a Hindu; an attitude, or a quality of being Hindu. In his words:

Hindutva is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as at times it is mistaken to be by being confounded with the other cognate term Hinduism, but a history in full...Hindutva embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race.

Whereas a Hindu, Savakar argued, was “primarily a citizen either in himself or through his forefathers of ‘Hindusthan’ and claims the land as his motherland,” Hindutva had little to do with the practices or beliefs of Hinduism. Instead, Hinduism was part of a larger civilizational project of “Hindutva.” Savarkar’s treatise on Hindutva was integral to the Hindu nationalist project.

He became one among a group of self-styled Hindu nationalist intellectuals on one end of the continuum who began carving out the idea of a country ruled by Hindus. These thinkers, many of whom were educated in foreign European capitals, would build on the orientalist fascination of European philosophers and scholars who

The heightened popularity of the Hindu right provided the Bharatiya Jana Sangh party (Indian People’s Organization) with an opportunity to make its mark in mainstream electoral politics. Between 1977–9, India was run by the Janata government. As L. K. Advani, who was also jailed for 19 months, and who would later become a senior member of the BJP, described the period:

If the Emergency was the darkest period in India’s post-Independence history, the righteous struggle for the restoration of democracy was undoubtedly its brightest. It so happened that I, along with tens of thousands of my countrymen, was both a victim of the Emergency and a soldier in the Army of Democracy that won the battle against it.

The Emergency shattered all existing conceptions of the Indian state. Whereas Nehru, Gandhi, and the Indian National Congress had presented India as a non-violent, anti-colonial, and militarily restrained nation, Indira presented India as strong, bold, and militarily assertive.

As Khinraj Jangid told me,

It is Indira who believes that violence is legitimate in the name of nation and state security. This is why Hindu nationalists have a fascination with Indira Gandhi. They like her. She transformed the non-nuclear, anti-power, non-violent idea of the state into something else. She was the antidote to Nehru.

When the Emergency ended, Hindu nationalists emerged emboldened, strengthened, and immensely popular. In 1980, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh merged with other parties to form the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP would still struggle to win elections, but the movement was no longer on the periphery. It was a disruptive force in Indian electoral politics. By the egregious actions of the Congress government during the Emergency, the Hindu Right had worked its way into the political mainstream. Indira became prime minister again in 1980. To thwart the challenge of the Hindu nationalists, the Congress party felt obliged to cede ground. It began opening up the economy (deregulation took place in the cement industry in 1982) and it moved

them to sign a pledge before allowing them access. In an address to the nation broadcast over radio, Indira described the threat against India as a “deep and widespread conspiracy.” She claimed that “forces of disintegration are in full play and communal passions are being aroused, threatening our unity.” She also promised that the “emergency proclamation will in no way affect the rights of law-abiding citizens.” Predictably, it was the poor who bore the brunt of the Emergency. The PM accelerated forced sterilizations on the disenfranchised and implemented mass slum clearances. These might have encompassed “the darkest days of Indian democracy,” but they were in no way an aberration in India’s post-independence story.

Indira also introduced amendments to the “Maintenance of Internal Security Act” (MISA) that gave the government unprecedented power to exercise “preventative detention.” When MISA had been originally introduced during the 1971 war with West Pakistan, the government told detractors it would not be used for internal dissent. The episode lasted 21 months. As Gyan Prakash writes, the attempt to rubbush away the Emergency Years as a type of an accident of history seemed a deliberate ploy to subvert the deep rot within Indian democracy itself. “India’s democracy, we are told, heroically recovered from Indira’s brief misadventure with no lasting damage, and with no enduring unaddressed problems in its functioning.”

But India, like so many (post-) colonial states was a highly stratified society operating in a cesspool of deep-seated corruption that relied on power and patronage. The Emergency Years and the deeper introspection that it failed to elicit, produced a series of consequences. It revitalized the Hindu nationalist movement. Thirty years had passed since Indian independence. An entire generation, brainwashed by Hindutva, was ready to be activated. Hindu nationalist parties, their advocates and members, became central players in the agitations against Indira Gandhi. The RSS was banned once more but the Emergency reinvigorated the movement, prompting their volunteers and leaders to label the moment as “the second freedom struggle.” “[The] Emergency was one of the few good events in the 60-year-old life of independent India...[It] galvanized the nation,” RSS member Sanjeev Kelkar is quoted as having said.

spoke dolefully of the loss of “an archaic Hindu civilization.” The Indian subcontinent, these British, French, and German scholars contended, had once been the cradle of all humanity and that “humanism” itself had been lifted out of Hindu values itself. They argued that Hindu society had faltered, lost its zeal and through patriotism and nationalism, would find reinvigoration. Among these, Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83), Aurobindo (1872–1950), Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), as well as organizations like the Arya Samaj (Society of Aryans; formed in 1875) and the Hindu Mahasabha (1915), were the most prominent. As a collective, they sought to both resurrect a “forgotten” and “erased” glory of India’s Hindu past as well as reformulate Hindus as a respectable, palatable, and intelligible community. To accomplish this project, author Jyotirmaya Sharma says the quartet of thinkers appeared to agree on several ideas they argued would resuscitate the Hindu identity.

First, it meant transforming Hinduism into a codified religion, founded on racial and doctrinal unity. It was foreigners after all who had diluted the nation from its Hindu core and made India insular; it was now the duty to recast India anew in the vision of a glorious past. Hinduism was therefore India and India was only Hindu. “Binding them all together was a singular vision of Hindu India and its destiny,” Sharma writes. All questions on religion were to be henceforth directed to the Vedas and the so-called golden age (400–600 CE), in what Sharma describes, as “the end of theology.” “There was little scope for a diversity of opinions, practices, rituals, observances, and individual choices,” Sharma argues. Or as author Anustap Basu explains, “it meant compacting a pantheon of a million gods in axiomatic Hindu icons like Rama or Krishna, absorbing errant, syncretic pieties, and picturing a singular Hindu telos.”

Second, it involved recasting Hinduism as masculine, aggressive, and militarily proficient. As Sharma writes, “Hindus had to live and die for an ideal.” According to this logic, the Muslim “invasions” and British colonial rule had only succeeded because Hindus had lost their way. The philosophers argued that Hindus would have to adapt, fight back, or perish. Third, to treat Hinduism as the most perfect of faiths, or as the mother of all religions. Fourth, to be forever vigilant of threats



from “outsiders.” The vilification of Muslims was therefore central to the revitalization of the Hindu quest for self-preservation. But this notion of self-preservation was also contingent on the creation of a majority community (for without it there would be nothing to protect). “Those who did not fall in line had to be marginalized, ignored, harassed, and if need arose, eliminated,” Sharma writes. Fifth, the answers to all questions were to be found in the Vedas. The final feature was the authorization to be blunt and harsh when dealing with enemies.

Scholars argue that the codification of the Hindu identity itself was the consolidation of an upper caste identity. In other words, Hindu nationalism itself was a caste project that had instrumentalized the British Census of the late nineteenth century to include all of the different religious and cultural rituals that existed in colonial India under the banner of “Hinduism.” Not only did the census compress the different castes and tribal communities into the category of “Hindu,” it allowed upper caste Brahmins the opportunity to wield control over all as well as promulgate a fiction that there had once been a unified Hindu civilization. These were the origins of Hindu majoritarianism. “These Brahminical scholars and leaders who talk about Hindutva being the religion of all castes must realize that the Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes, and Scheduled Tribes of this country have nothing in common with the Hindus,” Dalit writer and activist Kancha Ilaiah argues.

In his book, *Why I am not a Hindu*, Ilaiah writes that the upper castes had “reason to mix spiritualism and political power.”

In fact, post-colonial Hindutva is a Brahminical modernity which works strategically in the interest of Brahmin, Baniya and neo-Kshatriya forces. Its historical aim is to subvert the political assertion of the Dalitbahujan castes which form the democratic and secular social base of India...The blend of spiritualism and political power is very much rooted in their casteized patriarchal authoritarianism.

Likewise, Basu adds: “The modern project of a Hindu political

demonstrations took place across New Delhi. Soon there were anti-Muslim riots in Jabalpur, Ahmedabad, and Bhiwandi; peasant rebellions in rural India which culminated in the re-emergence of communist parties (like the Communist Party of India-Marxist) in Kerala and West Bengal. The India of her father was slipping and Indira instinctively centralized power. She packed the judiciary with marionettes, dismantled procedures in institutions, surrounded herself with close allies, and ramped up state security. She controlled it all. “The difference from the previous period was that traditional master-servant deference now took on an ugly sycophantic form,” author Gyan Prakash writes.

In 1968, Indira set up the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), an intelligence agency in the mold of the CIA. It reported directly to the prime minister’s office. Secret ties between RAW and the Israeli Mossad were set up immediately as a counter to Pakistan’s burgeoning relationship with China and North Korea. Though there were no diplomatic ties between India and Israel, RAW and Mossad began facilitating Israeli-India defense ties. Indira naturally also looked east to Moscow. Months before the 1971 war with Pakistan, India signed a treaty with the USSR. It turned India into the biggest destination of Soviet arms by 1991.

The buoyancy over defeating Pakistan in 1971, the successful completion of its first nuclear tests in 1974 (the only one of its kind at the time to be conducted by a country outside of the United Nations Security Council) could only camouflage the deep schisms that had unfurled during Indira’s tenure as PM. The rising communalism, the economic downturn precipitated by drought and the oil crisis of 1973, and the political unrest in different districts across the nation pushed her further inwards. When a judge at the Allahabad High Court ruled in June 1975 that Indira had been found guilty of electoral fraud, Indira’s autocratic leanings came to the fore. She declared a State of Emergency, during which she suspended the constitution, censored the media, postponed elections, and detained more than 110,000 people without charge or trial. The Indian government ensured a media blackout and when it battled to control criticism in the Western press, it kicked out foreign journalists or asked

produce generation after generation of cadres well versed in the larger project of Hindutva. Soon enough, political parties like Bharatiya Jana Sangh (1951) and the religious group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (1964) were created to “organize and consolidate Hindu society.” Jana Sangh, campaigning around re-uniting now “divided India”, agitating on matters of cow protection and Kashmir, did not achieve much success in its early contest of elections. That didn’t matter. Golwalkar continued emphasizing the need to create ideal Hindu men who could then be transplanted across the nation. Between the 1960s and 1970s, graduates of the earliest RSS programs would find themselves in administrative, organizational, policy positions across the country. Their moment would arrive soon enough.

### *The Emergency as Foil for Hindu Nationalism*

Following the death of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1964, Indira Gandhi was able to wrest control of the Congress party leading to her election in January 1966. PM Indira Gandhi led the country until March 1977, as well as for a second stint beginning January 1980 until her assassination in October 1984. The country Indira inherited in 1966 was one grappling with a fractured political and economic identity. India had achieved political freedom in 1947, but this hadn’t come with social revolution or any semblance of redress. She was thus made to face growing social strife that had emerged from a stalling economy, rising corruption and spiraling unemployment that had rolled on over the preceding two decades. In fact, the challenges were immediate. Within five months of her first year in office, a popular cartoonist named Bal Thackeray, formed a right-wing, ultranationalist, and nativist group called the “Shiv Sena” in Bombay. Thackeray spoke to the grievances of “the people” of Bombay, by blaming migrant labor and Muslims for scarcity of resources and the city’s ills. His party attracted tens of thousands and soon became the gatekeepers of the city.

Then, months later, a band of naked Sadhus, stormed the parliamentary complex in the country’s capital demanding that the government impose a country-wide ban on cow slaughter. Seven protesters were killed when police opened fire on the crowd. For days, violent

monotheism has been to induct the privileged and the pariah into a universal, congregational plane of Hindu identity.” Moreover, this also meant that the so-called “Hindu-Muslim” divide was therefore a fake binary. By implication, the focus on Muslims as the eternal enemy of “the Hindus” meant Muslims were only a distraction, scapegoats, in the pursuit of building a fictitious unified Hindu nation.

Hindutva thus became the central pillar that sustained the imaginaries of the Hindu Mahasabha, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Hindu Sanghathan. The RSS, a paramilitary organization formed in 1925, became the nucleus around which a family of organizations or the Sangh Parivar would grow. Even as the Indian National Congress (INC), under Mahatma Gandhi’s guidance became a mass movement in the struggle to secure freedom from the British, a Hindu nationalist and supremacist movement, forged by the dogma of Savarkar and later Madhav Sadhashivrao Golwalkar (1906–73), who became integral to the expansion of the RSS, dug its heels in. Savarkar and the Hindu Mahasabhas actively collaborated with the British, prioritizing their prize of a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu state) over what Savakar described as the whims of a “pseudonationalist body.”

Be it the Congress-led civil disobedience campaign (1931–2) or the “Quit India Movement” (1942) in which Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru were arrested, the Hindu nationalists were unenthused. They held a different vision for the nation. And in building a Hindu nation, there would be little place for compromise. “In our self-deception, we go on seceding more and more, in hopes of ‘nationalizing’ the foreigners and succeed merely in increasing their all-devouring appetite,” M.S. Golwalker wrote in his classic text, *We or Our Nationhood Defined*.

### *Flirting with European Fascists*

The project of Hindu regeneration required indoctrination and discipline. Hindu nationalists and supremacists looked on as a stimulating cocktail of science, hyper-nationalism, militarization, and social revolution began spreading across the heart of Western Europe. The movement found themselves particularly enthused by Italy’s



Benito Mussolini who became the country's leader in 1922 and dictator by 1925. Over the next decade, the nascent Hindu nationalist leadership held explicit contact with the fascist leadership in Italy and Germany, prompting academic and researcher, Marzia Casolari, to conclude that "Hindu nationalism had much more than an ideological interest and practice of fascism." B.S. Moonje (1872–1948), a one-time president of the Hindu Mahasabha and a mentor to K.B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS, was so impressed during a visit to Italy in 1931 that he returned to India with the vision to build military schools in the image of the Balilla and Avanguardist organizations, which focused on the indoctrination of youth. Moonje met with Mussolini, too, telling the Italian leader that "India now desires to prepare herself for undertaking the responsibility for her own defence and I am working for it." Describing his visit in his personal diary, Moonje wrote: "The idea of fascism vividly brings out the conception of unity amongst people...India and particularly Hindu India need some institution for the military regeneration of the Hindus. Our institution of the RSS under Dr. Hedgewar is of this kind, though quite independently conceived." Within three years of his return from Europe, Moonje began work on Bhonsla Military School as well as the Central Hindu Military Education Society, whose goal included the "military regeneration of the Hindus and to fit Hindu youths for undertaking the entire responsibility for the defence of the motherland."

To supporters of the RSS, the militarization of society was seen as a way to reassert Hindu history. Delegations of local Marathi journalists traveled on tours of Europe and returned enamored by "the socialist origin of fascism" and the transformation of Italy "from a backward country to a first class power." The dismantling of democratic institutions in Italy, the decisive action toward "different" and "undesirable" citizens into "enemies" turned Hindu nationalists into disciples. They appropriated it all: from the youth military schools and populism; the khaki shorts and black berets.

The Indian National Congress and the Hindu nationalist movement ran parallel in intervening years; the former purporting secular and liberal values, in which nationhood would be defined by an all-round

self-discipline was a methodology toward developing a self-righteous and moral superiority over his adversaries. Gandhi supported the protection of cows but wouldn't subscribe to legislation banning the consumption of beef (and certainly not the public lynchings) of those merely suspected of the trade in or in the consumption of beef. His prolonged dialogue with and perceived placation of Indian Muslims ultimately outweighed his asceticism as India's holy man. For this, he was assassinated on January 30, 1948 by a Hindu nationalist loosely associated with the right-wing organizations, the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. Gandhi's assassination, just five months after partition, precipitated the immediate arrest of scads of RSS members and the banning of the paramilitary organization for approximately a year. It pushed the organization underground, with around 20,000 of its members said to have been arrested during the raids and subsequent police investigation.

But the work went on. In 1948, the RSS formed the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) or the All India Students Council. The group focused on intimidating leftists at universities. The unbanning of the RSS in 1949 provided for the organization and Golwalkar, in particular, to embark on a new stage of its development: building a family of movements (Sangh Parivar) across all facets of the social ecosystem. In 1952, the RSS built the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram that became in 1980 a nation-wide organization that warded off Christian missionaries by integrating "tribal" communities into Hinduism. India, under Nehru in the 1950s, attempted to inculcate a secular nationalism, in direct contrast to demands of the Hindu nationalists who saw his foreign policy as fundamentally anemic. Hindu nationalists opposed Nehru's approach to Kashmir that saw it become a semi-autonomous entity under Article 370. Hindu nationalists urged Nehru to take Kashmir forcefully. "Hindu nationalism consolidated around a new, post-independence symbolic territory of a powerful India premised on a permanently aggressive stance toward external and permanent enemies," author Chetan Bhatt writes.

Under the leadership of Golwalkar, the RSS built an index of direct affiliate organizations; from labor to farmers to anti-poverty and education. They rewrote India's history and built schools designed to



with questions of power sharing among Hindus and Muslims after the departure of the British. In addition, Muslims were not *settlers* in Pakistan, and nor did the Pakistan movement seek to replace existing Hindu and Sikh minority communities with Muslims, although the violence at the time of partition caused a refugee crisis across both India and Pakistan. While Pakistan was initially conceived of as a Muslim homeland, within a few months it was evident that Pakistan—unlike the Zionist state—was not invested in settling Muslims from around the world—or even North India—in the nascent nation. The settler constitution of Zionism is integral to its ideology; this was not the case with Muslim nationalism on the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore, the Zionist project was much more invested in a mythical history—a trait it shares with Hindutva—than the founders of the Pakistan movement. In other words, symmetries will exist; some imagined, others more fanciful. However, when it comes to Hindu nationalism and the *complete* project of Zionism—be it cultural, political, labor, revisionist (right wing)—the two ideas share more than symmetry. They shared kinship. And their differences aside, the pursuit of consolidating dominion to create unified states with a single culture and identity, predicated on erasing the “other” is what ultimately defined their kinship.

### *Gandhi's Assassination and the Emergency Years*

It is easy to forget that both the Indian Congress and Hindu nationalist movement had emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Neither movement held a particularly long leash on history or tradition. Both developed as the context within the Indian subcontinent and around the world shifted. And though each side could distinguish itself from the other, through policy and perspective, the Congress party, with its elite educated, upper caste Hindu male leadership, often elucidated particular assertions about India's civilizational and spiritual superiority. The desire of the Indian National Congress to build a secular state notwithstanding, its values and its messaging intersected with the rising Hindu nationalist sentiment of the time. Gandhi's ethic of non-violence and civil disobedience, or *satyagraha* (truth force) after all, drew inspiration from Hindu sources, like the Bhagavad Gita. His vow of *brahmacharya* (abstinence) and

“Indianness,” made up by the plurality of the people within it. Hindu nationalists in contrast, appealed to a Hindu Rashtra, or a Hindu State, defined by an allround “Hinduness.” Both were still, however, fundamentally upper-caste Hindu organizations; despite its discourses, the Indian National Congress was also very Hindu in nature and practice. The lines, too, were often blurred; there were members of the Indian National Congress who belonged to the Hindu Mahasabha. The upper caste hegemony distressed members of the lower castes and also influenced Muslim leaders to push for more rights and representation, and eventually a separate polity.

Nonetheless, the developments in Europe only led to a further deviation between the movements. Under Nehru, the INC was building a reputation as an internationalist, anti-colonial movement as its vigor for liberation from British rule began to intensify. It did so while simultaneously refusing to support Britain's fascist foes as a new world war beckoned. Its decision to remain on “the right side of history” in World War II further augmented its reputation in the West as a movement purportedly led by principles (as opposed to revenge). In 1931, on a trip to Europe, Gandhi met Mussolini. His counterpart, Nehru, famously turned down an invitation in 1936 to meet the Italian dictator and similarly refused to meet Adolf Hitler in 1938 in protest over the Nazi annexation of Austria and occupation of the former Sudetenland (in what was then northern Czechoslovakia). In contrast, Savarkar and the Hindu nationalist movement simultaneously collaborated with the British government in India, endorsed fascist Italy, and then Hitler's expansionist project in Europe. Savarkar explicitly expressed his support for Hitler's annexation of Sudetenland in 1938 arguing that the “common desire to form a nation was essential for the formation of a nation.”

Responding to Nehru's snub of the German government in 1938, Savarkar, as president of the Hindu Mahasabha, in a speech titled, “India's foreign policy,” delivered on August 1, 1938, said: “Who are we to dictate to Germany, Japan or Russia or Italy to choose a particular form of policy of government simply because we woo it out of academical attraction? Surely Hitler knows better than Pandit Nehru does what suits Germany best?” As it so happened, the Hindu

nationalist support for fascism in Europe illustrated the gravitation toward zealotry as well as a growing embodiment of ethnonationalist talking points. It was also a demonstration of “practical politics,” which became the bedrock of Hindu nationalist foreign policy in the decades to come. As Savakar bluntly put it in a speech in 1938: “Any nation who helps India or is friendly toward her struggle for freedom is our friend. Any nation which opposes us or pursues a policy inimical to us is our foe.”

In March 1939, on the eve of World War II, the Hindu Mahasabha issued a statement endorsing the Nazi project, framing its support from an ideological affirmation for the revitalization of the culture, the symbolism and the expectation that it would provide a spark of its nascent but analogous nationalism at home:

Germany’s solemn idea of the revival of the Aryan culture, the glorification of the Swastika, her patronage of the Indo-Germanic civilization are welcomed by the religion and sensible Hindus of India with a jubilant hope...I think that Germany’s crusade against the enemies of the Aryan culture will bring all the Aryan nations of the world to their senses and awaken the Indian Hindus for the restoration of their lost glory.

In another speech in July 1939, in Pune, Savarkar drew explicit distinctions between Jews and Germans: “Nationality did not depend so much on a common geographic area as on unity of thought, religion, language, and culture. For this reason, the Germans and Jews could not be regarded as a nation.” The engagement between Hindu nationalism and European fascism had a series of implications. It established the Hindu nationalist movement as an ethnonationalist ideology with an emphasis on race, territory, and nativism as opposed to purely religion. As author Eviane Leidig has argued: “Hindutva is not centred on religion (although Hinduism does play a significant role) but rather on how religion is politicized in such a way that being Hindu generates belonging as an ethnonationalist identity.” Even if it was not recognized outside India as such, it recognized in itself, as part of a legion of (fascist) movements emerging across the world, especially Western Europe, as a viable alternative to “the moral

conceptualize a separate polity of their own.

It is this fear of Hindu majoritarianism that culminated in the formation of the idea of Pakistan prompting some to suggest that Israel and Pakistan, both formed on the basis of religion, were kindred spirits, too. Other scholars argue that traces of labor Zionism, often depicted as the dominant strain of the ideology, could be found in the socialist, internationalist agenda of the Nehru government, too.

These were all political movements in the making, laden with contradiction and opportunism. However, the comparisons between Zionism or Israel with both Nehru-led India and the project of Pakistan are simplistic and incomplete. For starters, the Indian struggle for freedom against the British, as flawed and contradictory as it might have been, cannot be compared to the Zionist so-called struggle for independence from the British. Through the auspices of the Balfour Declaration, it was the British who had demarcated Palestine for the Zionist settler-colonial project in Palestine in the first place.

As early as 1931, it was clear that all Zionists “concurred ideologically with the principle of Jewish sovereignty over all Palestine,” Zeev Tzahor writes. If anything, labor Zionism functioned as a trojan horse for settler-colonialism. They held disagreements on strategy, on timing, on language, “there was no difference between our militarists and our vegetarians,” as Jabotinsky put it.

The comparisons with Pakistan, too, are inadequate beyond the similar predicament that both Jews in Europe and Muslims on the Indian subcontinent faced in becoming a minority in the modern nation-state. Pakistan was not designed to be a settler-colonial, imperial outpost, as the Zionist state was envisioned.

The territorial lands that would ultimately make up Pakistan—as fluid as they may have been—still had geographic contiguity with the regions in which Muslims were a majority. This was the territorial demand of the founders of the Pakistan movement. They did not have extra-territorial ambitions, nor did they seek to make all of the Indian subcontinent into Pakistan. They were, primarily, concerned



surprise that Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the father of revisionist Zionism, or the version of Zionism that rejected labor Zionism's "negotiation" in the Holy Land, wrote his manifesto, *The Iron Wall*, in 1923, the same year that Savarkar published his treatise on Hindutva. Unlike labor Zionists, Jabotinsky was blunt about his ambitions. Hindu nationalists, too, saw the full project, understood the implications, and imbibed the values. Jabotinsky argued that only the complete disenfranchising of Palestinians would convince them to accept the Jewish settlers:

Culturally they [the Palestinian Arabs] are 500 years behind us, spiritually they do not have our endurance or our strength of will, but this exhausts all of the internal differences. We can talk as much as we want about our good intentions; but they understand as well as we what is not good for them.

On the "Arab Question," Jabotinsky argued: "Zionist colonization must either stop, or else proceed regardless of the native population. Which means that it can proceed and develop only under the protection of a power that is independent of the native population—behind an iron wall, which the native population cannot breach."

Jabotinsky and Zionist Revisionists accused labor Zionists of attempting to obscure what they all fundamentally agreed was a colonial project in Palestine. Likewise, for Hindu nationalists, the Congress party's "policy of appeasement" delayed the inevitable: the creation of a majoritarian Hindu state. Philosophically, Hindutva was fundamentally anti-Muslim. The "Hindu" identity was built almost entirely in opposition to Muslims, even placed ahead of the struggle for independence. So much so, that some of Hindutva's early ideologues extricated themselves from the larger Indian struggle for independence.

In theory, Zionism shared the imperial methodology of dispossession and settlement with European colonizers, including the British, as it did with Afrikaner 'puritans' and the bigoted policy of separate development exercised under apartheid South Africa. But it also resonated in the anxieties of Muslims in colonial India, who, fearing Hindu majoritarianism and their position of "minority," began to

bankruptcy" of liberal democracy. Crucially and most fervently for the time, it provided Hindu nationalists with a syntax and a methodology to organize, expand, and lay roots.

### *Hindu Nationalism and Zionism*

The geo-political reconfigurations following the end of World War I had a profound impact on independence and nationalist movements across the globe. India was no different. The INC, under the leadership of Gandhi saw the events of World War I, the Balfour Declaration, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and Caliphate, and the establishment of the British Mandate for Palestine in 1922, as further reasons to repudiate British rule. It also fomented closer ties with Muslims in India and the assertion of an anti-imperial agenda.

In Palestine, Zionism had arrived. Palestinians were increasingly displaced, excluded from employment opportunities and denied entry into Jewish-only trade unions. As the continuous flow of Jewish refugees from Europe increased, the rate of dispossession of Palestinians only increased. The program of building a Jewish state brought together Jews (as well as dispensationalist or Christian Zionists) of various persuasions and motivations. The movement spawned political, cultural and labor Zionism (and later revisionist Zionism), each with its own idea as to the character of this future state. However different these might have been, Zionism in totality agreed that this future state would need to have a Jewish majority and therefore establishing it was ultimately predicated on the act of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. The political project went against Orthodox Jewish beliefs, but it nonetheless proceeded. However, political Zionists were so detached from the sentiments of the Jewish polity, that they were prepared to accept a homeland in Argentina and Uganda, before cultural Zionists put that matter to rest. Once the political project was endorsed, it wasn't long before the Bible was used as "proof" that Jews belonged to Palestine. And in keeping with the peculiarities of the time, the Zionists reframed their movement as one befitting a "national liberation movement."

India was the crown jewel of the British Empire, and Zionists paid



attention to both the art and literature that emerged from India, as well as the mass mobilizations that threatened the British Empire. However, it was Hindu nationalists who identified immediate kinship with the Zionist movement. They saw no contradiction in admiring the European fascist movement that targeted European Jews as well as the Zionist project that looked to revitalize the Jewish race by building an exclusive homeland for the Jewish people. The support of European powers for a Jewish state in the Middle East, then, turned a colonial matter into a civilizational conquest. The subtext now was that “Israel was a device for holding Islam—and later the Soviet Union—at bay,” Edward Said wrote. Herzl, the writer Abdul-Wahab Kayalli argued, had routinely portrayed Zionism “as a political meeting point between Christianity and Judaism in their common stance against Islam and the barbarism of the Orient.” Unsurprisingly, in India, Hindu nationalists saw “the Jewish question” in Europe as “the Muslim problem” in their own backyard. “India’s Muslims are on the whole more inclined to identify themselves and their interests with Muslims outside India than Hindus who live next door, like Jews in Germany.” Savarkar said in a speech in December 1939.

For Hindu nationalists, the support for both fascism in Europe as well as Zionism won them admirers among the right wing in Europe and helped recast themselves as adjacent to the global racial elite. In Harbilas Sarda’s book, *Hindu Superiority: An Attempt to Determine the Position of the Hindu Race in the Scale of Nations*, the famous Indian judge writes that his effort to glorify the Hindu past, was not meant to “run down any creed or nationality [...] it may be remarked that the evils of the rule of the Afghans, Turks, and others were due not to the religion they professed but by their ignorance and backwardness in civilization.” It is precisely this invocation of a racial, civilizational, cultural superiority and adoption of a very European tradition of of pathologizing Muslims as a backward, problematic minority that lured Hindu nationalists and supremacists toward European ethno-fascism. For Hindu nationalists and supremacists, the comparison with Zionism, then, was not incidental. It merely represented an exchange in a larger, and longer conversation between Judaism and Hinduism, as “two age-old civilizations.” Hindutva’s affinity for the Zionist search for a homeland spoke to their

interactions across the centuries.

Hindutva’s construction of the Hindu proto-race (as “insider”) in opposition to Muslims (as ultimate “outsider”) through a focus on religion, culture, and philosophy was a marker of “civilization.” In other words, Hindutva held that the people of India were all fundamentally Hindu and that Hinduism was ultimately their race-culture. It also determined who could be part of the nation. As academic Satradu Sen argues, both Zionism and Hindutva developed “an interest in deploying the language and imagery of a racialized people whose health was both a scientific and a political problem.” Golwalker, in particular, was caustic and influential when he articulated the place of “the other” in his book *We or Our Nationhood Defined*: “All those not belonging to the national i.e. Hindu Race, Religion, Culture and Language, naturally fall out of the pale of real ‘National’ life.”

There were other similarities in the religious ethos of both Judaism and Hinduism, which right-wing proponents latched on to, too. Both Jews and Hindus purportedly rejected conversion and were unenthused by the proselytizing habits of others (Christians and Muslims). This underscored the aforementioned anxiety of racial “contamination” or being demographically overrun by Muslims or Arabs or Palestinians. This concern is foundational to racial superiority as purported by both Zionists and Hindu nationalists. The duo also found symmetry in the vigor of the religion itself. Whereas Hinduism was about seeking eternal enlightenment, Judaism could be characterized as a journey “to search after the knowledge of God.” These similarities became the religious backbone for building ties between the political projects of Hindutva and Zionism, which relied on myth-making as a form of statecraft.

But the relationship didn’t happen immediately. With the labor Zionist movement becoming the dominant stream in Palestine, Zionists reached out to the presiding movement in India: the INC and Gandhi. For labor Zionists, Gandhi represented a version of Hinduism that appeared to match their egalitarian vision of Zionism still in denial over the actions of the Haganah, or militia. The Hindu nationalists however chose to understand Zionism in its full totality. It is no